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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the evaluation process of the 1995 community college assessment reports for the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). It provides evaluation results, which found that the 18 colleges, even within limited resources and major restructuring, were able to demonstrate satisfactory progress as shown by assessment results and the uses they had made of them. Results are related by assessment category, including general education, majors, off-campus, other than dual-credit, but including distance learning, and dual credit instruction. A brief summary is presented of the college results, the improvements that colleges have made, and identification of what appears to be trends in assessing each category. Also discussed is the link between restructuring and student outcomes assessment. A list of examples is provided, demonstrating how assessment results have been used by colleges to meet VCCS's restructuring goals: (1) to improve student transfer, (2) to improve skills and the performance of students, (3) to improve effectiveness and reduce the costs of developmental studies, (4) to examine the purpose and structure of the general studies associate degree, (5) to revise technology to meet workplace needs, (6) to assist faculty in incorporating instructional technology approaches, (7) increasing enrollments in dual-credit, and (8) to increase the number of students who complete the associate degree. Discusses planning, evaluation, resource allocation, and college assessment processes. (VWC)

VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

SUMMARY

1995 ASSESSMENT REPORTS

Virginia Community College System
Summary
1995 Assessment Reports

The Evaluation Process

On November 14th and 15th, a team of six evaluators, the Vice Chancellor for Academic Services and Research, and the Director of Educational Planning met in Richmond to evaluate the 1995 community college assessment reports. Six weeks prior to these discussion sessions, each of the six evaluators had received either eleven or twelve reports to read and evaluate the 1994 letters to the presidents, a diskette with a blank copy of the evaluation checklist, and information on how the evaluation sessions in Richmond would be conducted. Each evaluator was responsible for preparing an evaluation checklist for the reports they were assigned to read; to lead the discussion for 3-4 reports; and to prepare an evaluative summary, reflecting the team consensus for these reports.

Teams of four evaluators met in forty-five minute time segments to discuss each report. Team members were rotated so that four teams, composed of different members, evaluated the twenty-three reports.

Six assessment coordinators volunteered to evaluate the 1995 reports; another coordinator new to the system participated as an observer. All of the evaluators have had experience in leading successful assessment programs at their colleges. They were well prepared and the report discussions were very thorough, with equal consideration being given to all of the major reporting topics. As a result, the process yielded evaluations that were objective and thorough, providing comments that should be useful to each college. The evaluators' comments are contained in the letters to the presidents and the evaluation checklists for each college that are attached to this report.

Evaluation Results

Even within limited resources and major restructuring, eighteen colleges, much to their credit, were able to demonstrate satisfactory progress as shown by assessment results and the uses they had made of them. Many colleges showed evidence of mature, cyclical, and smoothly functioning assessment programs. Yet, programs were not stagnant, and colleges seemed to be always looking for improved performance indicators and continuous faculty involvement, especially in interpreting findings. Principles of good assessment practice were evident throughout the satisfactory reports. The colleges used a mix of direct and indirect measures, internal and external evaluators, and both quantitative and qualitative evaluation processes. The effect of the creation of a viable assessment culture at most colleges has been that the colleges have used results to improve, in numerous ways, programs, services, teaching, and student learning. Student

outcomes assessment seems to have been especially relevant during the past two years as colleges have reduced the length of programs, met Southern Association requirements for institutional effectiveness, restructured, and maintained a vigilance on quality assurance. During the past two years, good assessment practice by two colleges garnered commendations from the Southern Association for institutional effectiveness, which includes student outcomes assessment. A third college received a commendation in this area the previous year.

The evaluations of three colleges showed that they had underachieved during this reporting period. Coincidentally, one of the three had a change in the instructional dean, another in the president, and the third had both a change in the president and instructional dean. Two colleges were deemed to be non-achievers and similarly, one of these had a change in president; at the remaining college, the institutional researcher/assessment coordinator resigned.

To address the problems experienced by each of these colleges, the Chancellor or Vice Chancellor of Academic Services and Research will meet with the presidents, instructional deans or both, as appropriate, to discuss each leader's future plans for improving the assessment program.

Results by Assessment Category

This year colleges began reporting on an annual schedule, covering fewer assessment topics each year, but still fulfilling all SCHEV reporting obligations over the course of every two years. This year's reports included assessment results in general education; majors; off-campus, other than dual-credit, but including distance learning; and dual-credit. A brief summary of the college results, the improvements that colleges have made, and identification of what appear to be trends in assessing each category are presented below.

General Education. Good performance indicators for achievement in general education continues to be a challenge to most colleges. As a direct measure, colleges generally rely on commercial, nationally normed tests such as the Academic Profile. Others are the College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) and the CAAP Essay Writing Test. One college, with the help of two psychology professors, has invested a great deal of time and developed its own general education test, and is in the process of ensuring its validity and reliability through pilot testing at other colleges.

The nationally normed tests showed this year, and as they have over time, that Virginia's community college students perform at equivalent levels to freshmen and sophomores at two-year and four-year colleges nationwide. As indirect indicators of student achievement, colleges continue to use standard tests such as the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire, and to survey

employers, current students, and graduates. Some have used focus groups and advisory committee members to determine whether students have the requisite skills to be successful in the workplace. One trend that the evaluators observed was that most colleges seem to be continuously revising objectives so that they are more meaningful to faculty, but also more measurable. Colleges are also vigilant that the general education objectives are taught in all areas of the curriculum. One college was commended by the evaluators for its course audit process that included a thorough review of the extent to which general education is infused throughout the curriculum.

Colleges appear to be streamlining the assessment of general education, addressing problems, in particular, that have been called to their attention by external evaluators who may also be employers. Many colleges have begun focusing on assessing communication skills, both oral and written; computation; computer skills; and critical thinking. They have added writing, speaking, and mathematics to many programs; i.e., an "across the curriculum" orientation. At one college, for example, engineering faculty are working with English faculty to include more writing assignments in engineering courses. Another noticeable trend has been the use of external readers of essays using criteria-based reviews. Colleges continue to be creative with assessment methods, using, for example, video tapes of final speeches and presentations of research projects to advisory committee members.

Improvements have resulted from curricular changes, including reorganizing course content and the sequence of courses; establishing pre-requisites; changing textbooks and resource materials; providing more opportunities for oral expression through reduced class size; including additional writing assignments in all courses; changing exams to include more critical thinking; increasing academic lab support; and increasing attention to pedagogy and the use of technology.

Majors. Studies of program length begun in 1994, in particular, required that colleges re-examine program objectives and requisite skills. Colleges reported that objectives were also revised to include performance factors that employers identified as important; to correct weak areas of student performance as identified through assessment data from previous years; and to ensure that student achievement of the objectives could actually be measured. Some colleges still struggle with establishing objectives that meet all of these criteria.

Colleges use a mix of both direct and indirect measures. They select among a menu of standardized achievement tests; professional licensure exams; capstone course exams; portfolio analysis; student surveys and interviews; exit interviews; graduate surveys; employer surveys; jury reviews; and skills checklists. Applying direct measures is easier in some majors because of the availability of standardized achievement tests. This is true, for example, in health technology

programs, electronics, office technology, automotive technology, and accounting. Colleges tend to use more indirect measures than direct, but the 1995 evaluators stressed, in their feedback to colleges, the importance of having at least one direct measure for each major.

The use of outside evaluators is prevalent in assessing the majors. Colleges use practicing professionals and members of curricular advisory committees to evaluate portfolios, research projects, and taped speeches. Many colleges cite the use of external evaluators as fostering partnerships. One college stated that the "assessment process provides an atmosphere of community partnerships among faculty, area businesses, and graduates". Another college expanded this concept, noting that the close contact between curricular advisory committee members, business and industry, local public schools (dual-credit assessment), and the four-year institutions enhances curricular design. At the same time, these partnerships enhance the preparation of some students to meet changing business and industry needs and other students to succeed at four-year institutions.

College were fairly thorough in reporting analysis and use of follow-up surveys of graduates of AAS programs. The reviewers were disappointed to note that few colleges integrated findings from transfer studies into their program analyses.

The findings of assessment in the majors have lead to improvements that include reorganization of course content, deletion of courses, and resequencing courses, as well as establishing prerequisites; changing textbooks and resource materials; increasing attention to pedagogy and the use of technology; purchasing updated equipment and software; and encouraging students to enroll in cooperative education and internship programs.

Off-Campus, Including Distance Learning. In the 1993 report, many colleges reported that they were still in the planning stages of assessing off-campus courses and programs. Since that time, a majority of colleges have finished developing their plans and begun implementing them. Most colleges have focused on comparing on-campus and off-campus grade point averages, grade distributions, and individual course grades, where the same classes are offered both on and off campus, but taught by the same faculty.

Colleges are aware that where adjunct faculty teach off-campus classes, there is potential for more variability in the achievement of established learning objectives. Where differences in grade distributions in the same courses are found between regular and adjunct faculty, division chairs have been prompt to discuss expectations with adjunct faculty. Colleges report that this process is generally successful and promotes course equivalency. One college has an exemplary process that helps to assure the equivalency of on-campus and off-campus courses. The college requires that each adjunct faculty create a portfolio that includes the course syllabus, all tests and handouts, and a sample of graded work

submitted by students. In turn, the portfolio is evaluated by the program head and the division chair, with results being discussed with the assessment coordinator. Most colleges also use off-campus student evaluations of courses and faculty, and their perspectives are also reflected in college-wide student surveys and graduate exit surveys.

College reports indicate that, overall, quality and student achievement in off-campus courses are equivalent to those offered on-campus. In instances where differences have been found in student performance, the colleges appear to have been quick to address the related problems through consultation between division chairs and individual faculty.

Distance Learning. The 1995 report is the first one in which colleges have reported on assessing distance learning. Assessment in this area is yet maturing and is complicated by the fact that colleges are using various delivery methods for this form of instruction which is neither time nor place bound. Colleges are in the process of planning for major changes in instructional delivery, while at the same time realizing the critical need, as with traditional off-campus instruction, to assure quality and instructional equivalency for courses. They are, nonetheless, faced with developing and implementing evaluative models for highly varied instructional methods and numerous settings. To cite some examples, instruction may be delivered through the use of compressed video, audio and video conferencing, or extended learning institutes. It may be delivered in on-campus or off-campus settings where students must be physically present, or students may study at home, and come to campus infrequently, or not at all. A third factor that complicates the evaluation of the comparability of distance learning with on-campus courses concerns whether faculty and students actually are in each other's presence during classes, or whether they communicate electronically, for example.

The evaluators of the 1995 assessment reports observed that the reports on assessing distance learning showed that assessment in this area is in its early stages. Colleges are now using broad parameters to evaluate their distance learning programs. They monitor important but general data trends and obtain some measures of satisfaction among students and faculty, and other information from which to judge the adequacy of services. Colleges appear, within the context of assessing distance learning, to have gained a greater appreciation for assessing the outcomes of student services. Most colleges are carefully monitoring factors such as student demographics (to evaluate changes in access); enrollment trends; non-completion and graduation rates; grade distributions and grade point averages for distance learning and on-campus instruction; student satisfaction; faculty satisfaction; faculty qualifications; course materials; instructional support services such as library and learning resources; facilities; and the adequacy and proper functioning of technology. Student evaluations of courses are another indicator used by most colleges. Several colleges noted that these evaluations are

especially valuable because many of the students enrolling in off-campus or distance learning courses are also simultaneously taking classes on campus.

Feedback in these areas has enabled colleges to make improvements in counseling, orientation, and first class meetings; voice mail and computer bulletin board systems; computing laboratories; course selection; and placement testing as well as course testing procedures. By monitoring student progress, colleges have a better idea of the types of students who will be successful in distance learning courses, and the kinds of changes in support services that need to be made to ensure student success. This is important groundwork for keeping withdrawal rates at a minimum, ensuring equivalency of courses, and for refining assessment processes in the future.

In written comments provided by evaluators, colleges have been encouraged to use more direct indicators of student performance in assessing distance learning. Evaluators suggested that colleges consider some of the same methods that have been useful in assessing off-campus and dual-credit instruction. These methods include cross-grading projects; capstone projects; standard test questions coupled with item analysis; the use of external evaluators; and on-site visits. Although more attention needs to be given to the use of direct indicators in assessing distance learning, the evaluators were convinced that the colleges were giving serious attention to ensuring the comparability of off-campus and distance learning instruction with the instruction on campus.

Dual-Credit Instruction. This was the first year that colleges have been required to report fully on assessing dual-credit instruction. As with other off-campus instruction (approximately 82% of dual-credit instruction was offered at high schools in fall 1993), course equivalency is a primary issue for assessment purposes. The results provided by most colleges in the 1995 report dealt with the following questions: How have dual-credit students performed in courses? How does their performance compare with college students enrolled in the same courses? How have dual-credit students performed at community colleges and four-year institutions? Do students rate dual-credit courses as more or less challenging than other college-level courses they have taken?

Many colleges observed that dual-credit students are achievers by nature. They were not, therefore, surprised when they found that the grades of these students were higher than the grades of students taking the same course on campus. In instances where the dual-credit grades were not equivalent or higher, most colleges have consulted with faculty, both regular and dual-credit, asking them to provide explanations and solutions to problems. One advantage of assessing dual-credit instruction as well as other off-campus instruction is that problems are identified each term and usually resolved fairly quickly.

Because so many courses are taught by high school faculty (approximately 83% in fall 1993), colleges seem to be investing a great deal of time, first, in ensuring that they have the appropriate credentials (18 graduate credits in the major field). Their next concern is ensuring that the dual-credit courses are, indeed, taught at the college level. This orientation derives not only from the large percentage of high school faculty teaching dual-credit courses, but also from some surveys indicating that students did not find dual-credit courses challenging.

Using these findings, several colleges reported that they have developed faculty mentoring programs. One college has done exemplary work in this area, requiring that all adjunct faculty produce a portfolio of work for each class they teach. The portfolio is evaluated by full-time faculty teaching the same course. At this college, problems were discovered in two English composition courses. Full-time English faculty chose to address the problem by creating a "model" portfolio containing papers graded according to full-time faculty standards. The model portfolios were sent to all dual-credit faculty and will be used to ensure that grade inflation does not occur in dual-credit classes.

Many colleges assured evaluators that they require equivalent syllabi and texts for dual-credit classes, and that division chairs visited dual-credit classes at least once each term. Overall, colleges were specific in stating that placement requirements for dual-credit students were the same as those required for other students. Several colleges, however, did not discuss their placement policies. This matter requires further investigation by the VCCS.

Colleges had the most difficulty when they attempted to evaluate the performance of dual-credit students at four-year institutions. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that a high percentage of students take a dual-credit course at a community college, but go directly to a four-year institution after graduation. Most colleges indicated that the next important step in assessing dual-credit students is to obtain specific and current data on student performance at four-year institutions. State Council staff have agreed to work collaboratively with System Office staff to extract data in a usable form from the statewide database maintained by the Council. Such data are crucial if community colleges are to improve dual-credit student assessment.

Restructuring and Student Outcomes Assessment

A natural link between assessment and VCCS restructuring initiatives has occurred as colleges over the past two years have reduced the length of associate degree programs. Colleges were asked to study all of their associate degree programs, following a design that included a review of educational objectives for each program (the first step in good practice for assessing majors), and determining the minimal number of credits that could be offered to achieve the objectives. During this process, colleges relied

heavily upon various assessment data to eliminate duplicate courses, determine appropriate prerequisites, and re-sequence courses within credit ranges established by the VCCS. They used assessment results (such as those from employer surveys and licensing exams, and analysis of transfer data), input from advisory committee members who had been directly involved in evaluating student performance, and external accreditation standards as guides in reducing the length of programs. Such information and assessment data analyses enabled each college to re-design programs, focusing on the skills and competencies that will enable students to succeed on the job and at four-year institutions.

Colleges stated that the effect of program streamlining will be determined, over time, as they analyze assessment data and seek explanations if, and when, changes in student performance occur. We anticipate that because faculty have been so immersed in program length reductions, they will be careful stewards and the best evaluators on this issue. Some colleges plan to ask faculty to identify the effects of streamlining in their program evaluation reports.

Several colleges are anticipating that one effect of streamlining will be that the number of graduates will increase. Others observed that in the future it may be more difficult to correct weaknesses identified in student performance because simply adding a course is no longer an option.

Included in the 1995 assessment reports were numerous other examples of how assessment results have been used by colleges to meet VCCS restructuring goals. A detailed listing is beyond the scope of this report, but some typical examples are provided below.

* *To improve student transfer*, colleges have analyzed transfer data, finding in several instances, that more AAS degree students are transferring. Using results such as these, colleges have developed more articulation agreements, improved advising, and changing courses to fit four-year institution requirements.

* *To improve skills and the performance of students*, colleges have used feedback from employers and other assessment data to identify deficiencies, then revised courses to include more writing, speaking, mathematics, critical thinking, and greater use of computers and library resources.

* *To improve effectiveness and reduce the costs of developmental studies*, colleges have tracked student performance over time, analyzed data on student and faculty perceptions of preparation for college-level courses, and made greater use of technology and tutors.

* *To examine the purpose and structure of the general studies associate degree*, colleges have identified courses that do not transfer, evaluated the success of graduates who transfer to four-year institutions, and looked at their standardized general education test scores.

* *To revise technology to meet workplace needs*, colleges are relying more on advisory committee and external evaluator input, surveying graduates and their employers yearly, and monitoring student scores on standardized tests to ensure mastery of technical skills important in changing work environments.

* *To assist faculty in incorporating instructional technology approaches* into teaching, colleges will continue to give special attention to student evaluations of courses, retention rates, and grades, especially in distance learning classes and those introducing computer use in the classroom. Instructional technology training programs and technology support centers are being initiated, and stipends are provided through the professional development initiative to encourage faculty participation in training. Some colleges have obtained grants to support faculty development.

* The restructuring goal of *increasing enrollments in dual-credit* has signaled the increase in college interest in improving assessment of dual-credit students previously described. Between fall 1993 and fall 1995, enrollment in dual-credit courses has increased from 3,710 to 5,329 students.

* *To increase the number of students who complete the associate degree*, colleges use assessment data obtained at various points in a student's program, as in capstone courses, to monitor their progress and intervene at appropriate times. Other assessment data show, for example, that the longer students stay at the colleges, the greater their success at four-year institutions. Colleges also seek information from non-completers and many are now making changes based on assessment of student services functions.

Planning, Evaluation, Resource Allocation and College Assessment Processes

Many reports assured evaluators that the colleges had been successful in integrating planning, evaluation, and resource allocation processes. They describe strategic planning processes where assessment findings are routinely used for environmental scanning, thereby identifying issues that need to be included in college planning strategies. Some colleges describe faculty and staff retreats where assessment results are used to identify future goals, determine their priority from a college-wide perspective, and establish the human and financial resources required to achieve the goals. One assessment coordinator reported that she has been named as a member of

three of the college's four governance committees in order to identify issues related to student achievement and supply related outcomes data to inform committee decisions.

At some colleges, assessment results are integrated into planning, evaluation, and resource allocation primarily through the program review process. In these instances, monies are often provided to programs that demonstrate through assessment findings, for example, a need for updated equipment. Colleges appear to be making deliberate changes to ensure that assessment increasingly effects resource allocation decisions. One president, in an annual memorandum to budget managers, requests that they identify budget implications including staffing, training, equipment, facilities, learning resources, and supplies, based upon the results obtained from assessment. Another college has shifted its program evaluation schedule to correspond to its budgeting calendar. The report of this college also provides examples where assessment results have contributed to hiring additional faculty, increasing program budgets, upgrading laboratories, implementing an automated placement testing system, and increasing professional development activities.

Although the community colleges continue to use assessment results for planning, evaluation, and resource allocation, the paradox is that almost none of the colleges have, in the face of restructuring and current fiscal constraints, had the luxury of retaining a full-time assessment coordinator. Many assessment coordinators have other duties that often are not closely related to assessment. One large college kept its full-time assessment coordinator, but the trade-off was a reduction in the assessment budget. The point here is that restructuring clearly has forced many colleges to minimize the resources devoted to assessment programs. Along with SCHEV, we have always maintained that the number of FTE assigned to assessment is less important than whether colleges can deliver the results. The conclusion we draw from our careful review of this year's reports, is that almost all our colleges are "delivering the goods." The colleges are to be commended for their ability to maintain assessment programs under continuing and severe fiscal restraints.

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